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The Middle East in 1998: American Preserve

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If we have to use force, it is because we are America; we are the indispensable nation. We stand tall and we see further than other countries into the future.¹

US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright spoke those words in February, in the midst of another confrontation with Saddam Husayn. The showdown reached a climax in December, when American cruise missiles and bombers targeted Iraq. But American standing as the "indispensable nation" was evident across the Middle East in 1998. American diplomacy, led by President Bill Clinton, brought Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu and Palestinian Authority (PA) President Yasir 'Arafat to a difficult agreement, negotiated at the Wye Plantation near Washington. American considerations decided how rigorously or leniently sanctions would be enforced against Iran and Libya. Where America did not invest efforts, there was stalemate, most notably in Israeli-Syrian relations. America also paid for its preeminence: in 1998, its embassies again became the targets of Islamist bombers. But America also had a long arm, retaliating with more cruise missiles and arresting suspects in the farthest corners of the world.

In the domestic affairs of the region, 1998 brought no noteworthy change. With the exception of Lebanon, which received a new president, all of the leaders lasted out the year. But political and biological clocks began to tick faster: by year's end, Israel and Turkey anticipated new elections, Jordan looked with apprehension as the health of its king failed, and pundits began to wonder how the Middle East would weather inevitable changes at the top. In the meantime, however, a major source of instability in the region went into remission: the Kurdish insurgency in Turkey. Repression did its part, but threats of war also worked: Turkey threatened Syria over its support for Kurdish separatism, and achieved a result that had eluded it for years.

A "new Middle East"? In 1998, most of the old rules still applied. America was not the only one to use force in the Middle East, nor was it the only party that considered itself "indispensable." To judge from the proliferation of weapons of every kind, the US would have to work even harder to keep the Middle East an American preserve.

LITTLE PROCESS, LESS PEACE

In 1998, it became clear that the water of Netanyahu would never really mix with the oil of 'Arafat. Some vigorous American stirring gave the impression that it might, but not for very long.

Israel and the Palestinians were stuck between the first and second of three scheduled "further redeployments" (FRDs) of Israeli forces from the West Bank and Gaza. These

FRDs were to precede final status talks, which were themselves scheduled to end by 4 May 1999. But Netanyahu saw his mission as putting the process into slow motion, insisting that the Palestinian side meet its security obligations. Nor was there any agreement about the extent of the last two FRDs (no figure was stipulated in prior agreements).

Indirect negotiations continued throughout the year, with the US in the role of frustrated mediator. The State Department's peace processors pushed for an Israeli turnover of 13.1% of Israeli-controlled parts of the West Bank — a compromise between Israeli insistence upon 9%, and Palestinian expectations three times as large. On the issue of a third FRD, which would determine the starting point for the final status talks, the gap was even greater. Israel insisted upon a redeployment so minimal as to be meaningless; the Palestinians expected it to be so substantial as to be decisive. In the meantime, Israel continued to build settlements, Palestinians continued to threaten unilateral declaration of their own state in May 1999, and Palestinians and Israelis continued to clash at pressure points on the West Bank and Gaza.

'Arafat time and again declared the peace process "dead" or "dying." But in practice, he used these opportunities to build some of his own credibility in Washington, in anticipation of final status negotiations. 'Arafat did so by keeping the Hamas Islamist opposition under a rigorous regime of intimidation, arrests and (according to his critics) assassinations. There were no major successful terrorist acts against Israelis in 1998.

As a result, Israel now found itself bearing much of the onus for the stalemate. Albright expressed "exasperation" and "impatience" with Netanyahu's refusal to carry out a "substantial" redeployment. The State Department officially described the peace process as being in "dire straits."² For ballast, Netanyahu relied upon the Republican-dominated Congress, where support for him was practically unquestioning. During a May visit to Capitol Hill, "Netanyahu was welcomed with the kind of full-throated, bipartisan heartiness that he rarely receives at home," reported *The New York Times*. "Members strained to clasp his hand and murmur, 'We're with you'."³ Something of the tension between the ends of the Washington Mall over the handling of Israel became evident in one particularly bitter exchange. "I think it's wrong for the American secretary of state to become an agent for the Palestinians," announced Republican House majority leader Newt Gingrich. The State Department spokesperson denounced this as "an extremely provocative, unjustified and outrageous suggestion," and the White House spokesperson called it "highly offensive."⁴ Many Israelis were alarmed by the way Netanyahu allowed Israel's "special relationship" with the US to rest so totally on one branch of government, a deterioration which Labor opposition leader Ehud Barak described as "political and strategic vandalism."⁵

CROSSING THE WYE

American diplomacy finally went into high gear in September, when Netanyahu and 'Arafat came to New York for the UN General Assembly. Albright put together a plan for an intensive negotiation between the leaders, mediated by Clinton himself. In early October she came to the region to do the preliminary work for the summit, which opened at the Wye Plantation near Washington on 15 October. The summit was planned to last three to five days. In the end, it turned into a nine-day marathon, demanding more sustained time of an American president (some eighty hours) than any Arab-Israeli diplomatic encounter since Camp David.

The purpose of the exercise was to wring difficult concessions from a reluctant Netanyahu. For as Netanyahu well understood, his immediate predecessors had paid the full price of agreements with 'Arafat. Yitzhak Rabin had sacrificed his life, and Shimon Peres his premiership, on the altar of the peace process. True, in Israeli–Palestinian relations, a vast asymmetry of power worked in Israel's favor. But the Palestinian leader never seemed to pay for his mistakes (a point often made by his Palestinian critics), whereas Israeli prime ministers paid immediately and fully for theirs. Netanyahu, whose coalition had the narrowest of majorities (61 of 120 members of the Knesset) hoped against hope that he would not follow the grim precedent. But at the end of the day, the main significance of the Wye River Accord would not be the details of one more FRD. It would be the way in which the agreement undermined Netanyahu's coalition, setting the stage for new elections in spring 1999. This unexpected outcome constituted the longer-term significance of Wye, for Israelis and Palestinians alike.

The territorial terms of Wye included a transfer of 12% of Israeli-controlled "Area C" to "Area B," a zone where Palestinians had civil control and Israel maintained security control. Another 1% of "Area C" would be transferred to "Area A," where Palestinians held complete civil and security control, and 14.2% of "Area B" would be transferred to "Area A." In return, the Palestinian side committed itself to a policy of "zero tolerance" of terrorism, and agreed to confiscate illegal weapons, prevent incitement against Israel, and convene the Palestine National Council (PNC) to reaffirm 'Arafat's past nullification of clauses in the Palestine National Covenant calling for Israel's destruction. This was to take place in a special session convened in the presence of Clinton. The sides also concluded a protocol for the opening of the Gaza airport.⁶

The most striking element in the Wye River Accord was the role assigned to the US. One keen observer noted that in the seven-page agreement, the US and its president were mentioned thirteen times, excluding Clinton's signature. This was more than the US was mentioned in the 1997 Hebron Protocol and Note for the Record, the 1995 Oslo II accord, the 1993 Declaration of Principles, the 1994 Jordan–Israel Peace Treaty, and the 1978 Egypt–Israel Peace Treaty *combined*. American certification became crucial to every step of implementation — so much so that this same observer could write of "the Americanization of the Israeli–Palestinian peace process."⁷ In particular, the agreement institutionalized a CIA role in monitoring Palestinian counter-terrorism measures, which were preconditions for further redeployments.⁸

The negotiations at Wye had their share of high drama, real and staged, and the usual plays of brinkmanship on all sides. High and low points included the arrival of the ailing (indeed, the dying) King Husayn, who flew in from the Minnesota clinic where he was fighting his last battle, in order to plead for compromise; the Israelis' deposit of their luggage on the lawn, in a threatened walk-out (the "suitcase ultimatum"); and Netanyahu's failed attempt to extract a last-minute concession from Clinton, in the form of freedom for convicted spy Jonathan Pollard. The final scene took the form of a White House signing ceremony on 23 October. In State Department parlance, the peace process was "back on track."

NON-IMPLEMENTATION

For the next two months, the process seemed to gain momentum. It passed its first test on 29 October, when a suicide bomber detonated himself alongside a school-bus convoy in Gaza, killing one Israeli soldier. 'Arafat responded with a crackdown on Hamas,

ordering the arrest of 400 persons, and house arrest for Hamas spiritual leader Ahmad Yasin. The process passed a second test on 19 November, when the Israeli cabinet ratified the agreement. Israel then carried out the first stage of the second FRD, and allowed the opening of the Gaza airport. Clinton gave a boost to implementation, with a visit to Israel and Gaza from 12-15 December. The most significant leg of the journey, Clinton's visit to Gaza, highlighted the gains 'Arafat had made with the Clinton administration.

But the Wye agreement would never be implemented as written because its Israeli signatory soon paid for it politically. Netanyahu's style and personality had driven the centrists out of his party, and left him utterly dependent on rightists who, from Wye onward, set out to punish him. Nothing he did — including the pre-Wye appointment of Ariel Sharon as foreign minister and post-Wye foot-dragging — could persuade them that he deserved any fate but banishment. "The agreement is a failure," announced an editorial in the newspaper of a key coalition partner, the National Religious Party. "Netanyahu surrendered. Netanyahu failed."⁹ Within his own Likud party, criticism ran high. "We cannot come to terms with this horror, with this stupidity," announced Likud parliamentarian Benny Begin.¹⁰ On 21 December, Netanyahu's rightist critics joined the opposition to pass a roll-call vote for early elections. The irony: Netanyahu began to pay the price for peacemaking just as Rabin and Peres had done, and he was made to pay it by an intransigent Israeli right, just as they had. Despite Netanyahu's own intentions, he would most likely be remembered as the man who put the Likud seal of approval upon the Palestinian state-in-the-making.

As for 'Arafat, he remained firmly in the saddle. In the absence of any alternative, he continued to be financed and feted by all. In 1998, \$900m. flowed into the PA from thirty-two countries and seventeen international institutions. On 30 November, an American-orchestrated donor conference lined up \$2bn. in additional pledges to the PA. At home, 'Arafat (unlike Netanyahu) had no difficulty keeping his opponents at bay. For over a year, suspicions of corruption hung heavily over his cabinet, so in August he reshuffled it: only one member of the previous cabinet was dropped. Israeli prime ministers would come and go — by the end of 1998, 'Arafat had seen two brought low and a third brought to the brink — but the "Palestinian partner" had yet to exhaust his nine lives.

THE ROADBLOCK TO DAMASCUS

There had been no Syrian-Israeli negotiations since early 1996. In 1998, the Netanyahu government sent out various feelers, but none of these initiatives had the blessing of the US, and so none stood a chance of success.

One initiative approached the problem from the angle of south Lebanon, where Israel and Hizballah battled in Israel's self-declared "security zone." On 3 January, Israeli Defense Minister Yitzhak Mordechai surprised the Arab world by announcing that Israel accepted UN Resolution 425 — a resolution which, in the Arab interpretation, called for an unconditional, immediate and unilateral Israeli withdrawal from south Lebanon. But in Mordechai's interpretation, the resolution also put a burden on the Lebanese Government, which would have to "halt terror and violence, prevent attacks against Israel from Lebanese territory, [and] create normalized relations on both sides of the border and cooperation between the IDF and the Lebanese army."¹¹ Negotiated security arrangements would suffice; Israel would not insist on a peace treaty or political normalization.

But to Syria, this smacked of a separate deal, and when the Americans were tempted to pick up the proposal, Lebanon and Syria issued a joint statement rejecting it. They found international support for their position in French President Jacques Chirac, who seemed determined to retrieve the French position as patron of the Levant. On 5 April, Chirac announced that an Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon should be “unilateral” and “unconditional.” Asad, who rarely ventured abroad, troubled to visit Paris in July — his first appearance there in twenty-two years — to shore up French support. According to a reliable source, Chirac and Asad agreed that France would enjoy a privileged commercial and cultural standing in Lebanon; in return, France would support the Syrian–Lebanese position on an Israeli withdrawal.¹² When Netanyahu visited the UN in May, he reiterated Mordechai’s proposal, insisting that “we added no conditions” to the existing UN resolution.¹³ But there were no takers. As for a unilateral Israeli withdrawal, it had some vocal advocates in Israel, but no momentum. In 1998, twenty-four Israelis died in Lebanon, down from thirty-nine the previous year, a decline that relieved some of the domestic pressure for withdrawal.

Later it was revealed that Netanyahu also opened a back channel to Asad via the American Jewish millionaire Ron Lauder, with the objective of reopening direct talks. Lauder, in the course of six shuttles between Jerusalem and Damascus in August and September, brought an Israeli proposal to Syria, predicated upon a combination of Israeli withdrawal from (parts of) the Golan, and American warning stations (staffed also by Israeli personnel). But Netanyahu would not provide Asad with a map of his proposed withdrawal, and Asad finally broke off the exchange.¹⁴

IRAQ WRIGGLES LOOSE

While Arab–Israeli relations were stuck, the situation in Iraq threatened to come unstuck, as Saddam Husayn looked for new strategies to throw off the economic sanctions and weapons inspections that “contained” Iraq. By the end of the year, he had managed to shake off the inspections, although the sanctions remained in force. Obviously, too, the US remained frustrated in its efforts to dislodge Saddam. He was perhaps the best example of Samuel Huntington’s observation that “the best way for a dictator of a small country to prolong his tenure in power may be to provoke the US into denouncing him as the leader of a ‘rogue regime’ and a threat to global peace.”¹⁵

Saddam remained a firm believer in the utility of weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Iraq’s integrated processes of research, development, design and production were no longer intact, but Iraq sought to maintain a skeleton capacity in each area, which could be given sinew and flesh in future. Iraq thus continued to evade full compliance with the demands of the UN Special Commission on Iraq (UNSCOM) inspectors.

The only possible incentive for compliance was the prospect of a lifting of economic sanctions. What damage had these sanctions done to Iraq? The US claimed that sanctions had cost Iraq \$110bn.¹⁶ Critics of sanctions also claimed they had killed 1m. Iraqis. But the latest Iraqi census showed that the population had increased from 18.5m. in 1990 to 22m. in 1997. As Iraq’s official newspaper put it, “this is an unusual increase for a people who have been exposed to embargo, starvation and disease.”¹⁷

But Saddam certainly felt that the combination of inspections and sanctions had left him crippled and he decided to be rid of at least one set of restrictions. He first approached his objective by defying UNSCOM’s inspectors. In January, UNSCOM head Richard

Butler filed a tough report on Iraqi non-compliance, emphasizing denial of access to eight "presidential sites," which were suspected of concealing WMD evidence.

The US quickly picked up the gauntlet and launched a worldwide diplomatic offensive and a major force build-up in the Gulf. But at home, Clinton seemed unable to persuade a stable majority to support military action. At the beginning of February, polls showed that a majority of Americans favored a military solution; two weeks later, opinion had shifted in favor of diplomacy. Abroad, there was also trouble. Britain and Germany were willing, but France and Russia were not. America's Arab allies also wanted no part in an operation. Saudi Arabian Crown Prince 'Abdallah turned down a request by US Defense Secretary William Cohen to use Saudi airbases for sorties against Iraq. Even Bahrain, home of the US Fifth Fleet in the Gulf, declined a US request to fly sorties out of its airbases.

While American diplomacy faltered, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan began conducting his own maneuvers in Baghdad, and on 23 February he signed an agreement with the Iraqi Government allowing UNSCOM inspectors "immediate, unconditional and unrestricted access" to all sites. Special provisions would be put in force to preserve Iraqi "dignity" during the inspection of the eight "presidential sites." Most importantly, Annan led Saddam to expect some progress toward the lifting of UN sanctions. The US had no choice but to stay its hand while UNSCOM tested the agreement, and France and Russia claimed credit for sparing the world a military confrontation.¹⁸

But the US continued to maintain two dozen ships in the Gulf, with a large inventory of Tomahawk cruise missiles. Having gone through the tremendous expense of a major build-up, the US was not prepared to stand down since Saddam might renege at any moment on his agreement with Annan. Saddam did not disappoint. In August, Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister Tariq 'Aziz had a confrontational meeting with Butler (a videotape of which Iraq released) and Annan's agreement began to unravel. Iraq put new restrictions on UNSCOM access to sites and ceased all cooperation with inspectors from 31 October. This time, Saddam's brinkmanship looked like direct defiance of the UN, much to the embarrassment of France and Russia. On 14 November, American B-52 bombers were en route to a bombing attack on Iraq, when Iraq backed down once more. Clinton ordered the bombers back in mid-mission but given Saddam's pattern of "cheat and retreat," the US fully expected another crisis.

It came in the form of an Iraqi refusal to turn over suspect documents to Butler. As the crisis built for a third time in less than a year, Butler again recalled the UNSCOM inspectors and support staff, and submitted one more report finding Iraq in non-compliance. Clinton (in the midst of congressional impeachment proceedings) gave the order to launch "Operation Desert Fox," and for four days, from 16-19 December, the US launched air attacks and cruise missile strikes against Iraq, with the intention of "degrading" Iraq's WMD capabilities.

Whether the bombing "degraded" anything was difficult to determine. American "credibility" had been upheld by the bombings (through 1998, critics had described US policy as "rhetoric and retreat") but UNSCOM did not return to Baghdad after "Desert Fox," so that Saddam could claim that he had achieved at least one objective: the end of the most intrusive inspections regime ever imposed on a sovereign state. There were plenty of experts who thought the inspections had become useless anyway, and who claimed that Saddam's WMD programs were better checked by periodic bombings.

Which was a better guarantor of containment? The weapons inspector or the Tomahawk missile? At the end of 1998, no one could say for certain.

TERRORISM REDUX

Other acts of brazen defiance were the work of Islamist extremists, bent on punishing America for being America. There had already been two rounds in the 1990s. The first, which opened with the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center in New York, had been won by the US. The perpetrators had been arrested, tried and convicted. Final closure came on 8 January: Ramzi Ahmad Yusuf, the mastermind of the bombing whom the Americans had plucked out of hiding in Pakistan, was sentenced by a New York court to life plus 240 years in prison. But the second round had been won by the Islamists. They had struck a blow in Saudi Arabia in the 1996 Khubar Towers bombing, killing nineteen American military staff and the case remained unresolved (see *MECS* 1996, pp. 582-85).

Round three opened on 7 August, when two massive car bombs exploded outside the US embassies in Nairobi and Dar al-Salam. The two blasts killed 301 people — twelve were Americans, thirty-nine were foreign employees of the embassies and 250 were Kenyan and Tanzanian bystanders. US sources immediately focused their suspicions upon a murky Saudi multi-millionaire, Usama bin Ladin, an Islamist zealot and bankroller of an organization called *al-Qa'ida* (the Base) which was devoted to attacking US interests. Bin Ladin, who had fought in Afghanistan to drive out Soviet invaders, had already put the US on notice. On 23 February, he had appeared as signatory to a *fatwa* declaring that "to kill the Americans and their allies, both civilian and military, is an individual duty for every Muslim who is able, in any country...until their armies, shattered and broken-winged, depart from all the lands of Islam."¹⁹

On 20 August, the US launched cruise missile strikes at suspected training camps in Afghanistan run by *al-Qa'ida*, and at a pharmaceutical plant in Khartoum, Sudan, which the US suspected of manufacturing nerve agents for Bin Ladin. The strike against the Khartoum plant, based upon flawed intelligence, would quickly be revealed as a wrong call. More precise was the work of the FBI, which sent 300 of its personnel abroad, managed to track down suspects in several countries, and brought them back to the US. "We are not going to rest," said US attorney-general Janet Reno. "We are not going to forget. We are going to pursue every last murderer until justice is done."²⁰

But Bin Ladin himself remained in Afghanistan, where he enjoyed the status of a protected guest. The US offered a \$5m. reward for information leading to his arrest and conviction, and he emerged on the FBI list of ten-most-wanted. But the Taliban regime in Afghanistan showed no inclination to yield to American pressure and it began to loom as the next addition to the list of pariah states. As long as Bin Ladin remained at large, the US could not claim victory. But the fact that militant Islamists had to operate from such remote redoubts as East Africa and Afghanistan was further evidence of their fading fortunes in the Middle East.

LIBYA AND IRAN REASSESSED

Libya and Iran, two veteran members of the pariah list, improved their international standing in 1998. They did so amid heated policy debates in the US, which played the crucial role of defining both countries for much of the world.

The US and Britain moved decidedly toward "closure" with Libya, when on 24 August they agreed to allow the two Libyan suspects in Pan Am 103 Lockerbie bombing to be tried in The Hague, rather than Scotland. The plan was that a Scottish court, installed in the Netherlands, would try the case. The UN Security Council swiftly passed a resolution calling upon Libya to hand over the suspects for trial; once it did so, sanctions would be lifted. Then another hurdle emerged: if convicted, where would the two serve their sentences? Annan visited Libya in December, to move the plan forward, but the issue would only be resolved in 1999. The bottom line, however, was that Libyan leader Mu'ammarr al-Qadhafi had survived bombings, sanctions and international delegitimation.

Iran gave rise to a more complex debate. On 7 January, Iranian President Mohammad Khatami gave a 45-minute interview to CNN, in the course of which he lauded some aspects of the US. "I respect the American nation because of their great civilization," he announced. "We seek what the founders of the American civilization were also pursuing four centuries ago....Right now, I recommend the exchange of professors, writers, scholars, artists and tourists."²¹ The State Department spokesperson issued a cautiously optimistic response: "We welcome the continuation of a new tone in Iranian statements. President Khatami's extensive comments with respect to US civilization and values are interesting. We appreciated the spirit in which his remarks were offered."²² In February, the US national wrestling team was welcomed enthusiastically in Tehran, and talk of "ping-pong diplomacy" proliferated.

But during a return visit, Iranian wrestlers were fingerprinted and photographed on entry to the US. When the State Department issued its annual *Patterns of Global Terrorism* at the end of April, it described Iran as "the most active state sponsor of terrorism in 1997."²³ Iran called the report "another brick in the wall of distrust between the two countries."²⁴ Yet in May, the Clinton administration waived the secondary sanctions authorized by the Iran-Libya Sanctions Act of 1996, thus lifting all American penalties against European companies doing business with Iran. Both sides mixed their signals and it was unclear whether they were moving closer together or further apart.

Europe moved more resolutely to mend ties with Iran. The so-called "critical dialogue" had been suspended the previous year, after a German court traced Iran to the murder of dissidents in Germany. But in June, EU foreign ministers decided to resume a "substantive and comprehensive dialogue" with Iran "in a spirit of increased international cooperation."²⁵ The chief remaining obstacle to Euro-Iranian reconciliation remained the late Ayatollah Khomeini's 1988 *fatwa* against British-Indian author Salman Rushdie. British Foreign Secretary Robin Cook pressed for some additional Iranian statement that would make the issue go away, and on 25 September, Iranian Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi seemed to provide it: the Iranian state had "no intention, nor is it going to take any action whatsoever, to threaten the life" of Rushdie. Much was made of this gesture in pro-dialogue circles, and by Rushdie himself: "This looks like it's over." Yet neither Kharrazi nor Khatami did anything to void the \$2.5m. bounty which the semi-private Fifteenth Khordad Foundation had placed on Rushdie's head.²⁶

There was also growing international concern about the Iranian missile program. On 22 July, Iran tested its new medium-range missile, the Shihab-3, with a potential range of 1,300km — far enough to reach India, Russia, Israel and all the GCC countries. On 26 September the missile was paraded in Tehran and presented to the Iranian public as a deterrent to Israel: "If Syria were attacked by Israel," said Iran's defense minister, 'Ali

Shamkhani, "Iran would respond in a way Israel could not imagine." Israeli Defense Minister Mordechai responded in kind.²⁷ The missiles seemed destined to replace terrorism and Rushdie as the prime obstacle to Iran receiving an American seal of approval.

"The only people who do not realize that the Islamic revolution is over," said a French analyst, "are some people in Washington and those in power in Tehran."²⁸ The problem was that these were precisely the people who mattered most.

THE TURKISH PIVOT

While the US worked to prevent the emergence of Iran as a Middle Eastern power, it encouraged Turkey to claim just that stature. From 5-9 January, the US, Israel and Turkey conducted a joint naval search-and-rescue exercise in the Mediterranean, code-named "Reliant Mermaid." Many in the Arab world read the exercise as a shot across the bow of Syria, and Turkey began to loom ever larger in Arab concerns.

But when Turkey finally did use its leverage against Syria, it had nothing to do with a grand American strategy. Turkey was simply fed up with Syrian indulgence of the Kurdish insurgents of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (*Parti Kerkeren Kurdistan*; PKK). Turkey was already on the offensive against the PKK in the field and had started to pursue its leaders. On 13 April, Turkish commandos staged a raid in northern Iraq and captured a senior PKK commander. Next on the target list: PKK leader Abdallah Öcalan, who was known to reside in Damascus under Syrian protection. That Syria denied Öcalan's presence enraged Turkey still more.

In September, Turkish Prime Minister Mesut Yılmaz visited Israel, and the official Syrian media described his visit as a "hostile move." Yılmaz responded in kind: "Frankly, I don't care how Syria comments on my visit. Anyone who speaks of hostility in the region...should focus on the policies of the Syrian Government which encourage separatist terrorism in Turkey."²⁹ This is precisely what Turkey proceeded to do. In October, Turkish chief-of-staff Gen. Hüseyin Kivrikoğlu suddenly announced that Turkey and Syria were in a "state of undeclared war." Turkey mobilized troops on the Syrian frontier, and seemed eager to bloody Syria's nose. War seemed so imminent that Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and Iranian Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi rushed off to Damascus and Ankara in an effort to prevent it.

On 20 October, Syria capitulated, agreeing to suspend all support for the PKK and promising that Öcalan and his fighters would be banished from its territory. But this did not end the saga, for Öcalan began to wander from one refuge to another, pursued relentlessly by Turkey. He first turned up in Moscow, then in Rome, where on 13 November he was arrested. An Italian court then refused a Turkish extradition request, on the grounds that the death penalty remained on Turkish books. The Turkish public demonstrated angrily, Kurds in Europe did the same, and Italy desperately sought some escape from its involuntary involvement. Turkey would eventually lay its hands on Öcalan in 1999.

The near-war of 1998 signalled that Turkey would no longer hide its power from its Middle Eastern neighbors. Perhaps no development had greater potential for changing the strategic balance in the region. Yet Turkey had used its leverage to resolve what it regarded as the domestic problem of the Kurdish insurgency. It was far from certain that Ankara would act in the Middle East in any wider strategic concert. For while Turkey

had amassed formidable military and economic power, it remained deeply divided politically, and crippled by weak governments. By year's end, the freshness—date of the Yilmaz government had also expired, and Turkey looked forward to new elections.

The rest of the Middle East also looked forward with growing apprehension to domestic change. Would the regional order maintained so scrupulously by the US in 1998 hold up under domestic stress, against which cruise missiles were helpless?

NOTES

For the place and frequency of publications cited here, and for the full name of the publication, news agency, radio station or monitoring service where an abbreviation is used, please see "List of Sources." Only in the case of more than one publication bearing the same name is the place of publication noted here.

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